

ALICE of OLD VINCENNES

By MAURICE THOMPSON

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CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE CHERRY TREE, UP to the days of Indiana's early statehood, probably as late as 1825, there stood, in what is now the beautiful little city of Vincennes on the Wabash, the decaying remnant of an old and curiously gnarled cherry tree known as the Roussillon tree, le cerisier de Monsieur Roussillon, as the French inhabitants called it, which as long as it lived bore fruit remarkable for richness of flavor and peculiar dark ruby depth of color. The exact spot where this noble old seedling from la belle France flourished, declined and died cannot be certainly pointed out, for in the rapid and happy growth of Vincennes many landmarks once notable, among them le cerisier de Monsieur Roussillon, have been destroyed and the spots where they stood, once familiar to every eye in old Vincennes, are now lost in the pleasant confusion of the new town.

The old, twisted, gum embossed cherry tree survived every other distinguishing feature of what was once the most picturesque and romantic place in Vincennes. Just north of it stood, in the early French days, a low, rambling cabin surrounded by rude verandas overgrown with grapevines. This was the Roussillon place, the most pretentious home in all the Wabash country. Its owner was Gaspard Roussillon, a successful trader with the Indians. He was rich, for the time and the place, influential to a degree, a man of some education, who had brought with him to the wilderness a bundle of books and a taste for reading.

It is not known just when Vincennes was first founded, but most historians make the probable date very early in the eighteenth century, somewhere between 1710 and 1730. In 1830 the Roussillon cherry tree was thought by a distinguished botanical letter writer to be at least fifty years old, which would make the date of its planting about 1780. Certainly, as shown by the time stained family records upon which this story of ours is based, it was a flourishing and wide topped tree in the early summer of 1778, its branches loaded to drooping with luscious fruit. So low did the dark red clusters hang at one point that a tall young girl standing on the ground easily reached the best ones and made her lips purple with their juice while she ate them.

That was long ago, measured by what has come to pass on the gentle slopes of rich country from which Vincennes overlooks the Wabash. The new town flourishes notably and its appearance marks the latest limit of progress. Electric cars in its streets, electric lights in its beautiful homes, the roar of railway trains coming and going in all directions, bicycles whirling hither and thither, the most fashionable styles of equipages from brougham to pony phaeton, make the days of flintlock guns and buckskin trousers seem ages down the past, and yet we are looking back over but a little more than 120 years to see Alice Roussillon standing under a cherry tree and holding high a tempting cluster of fruit, while a short lumpy-backed youth looks up with longing eyes and vainly reaches for it. The tableau is not merely rustic; it is primitive.

"Jump!" the girl is saying in French. "Jump, Jean; jump high!"

"Yes, that was very long ago, in the days when women lightly braved what the strongest men would shrink from now."

Alice Roussillon was tall, lithe, strongly knit, with an almost perfect figure, judging by what the master sculptors carved for the form of Venus, and her face was comely and winning, if not absolutely beautiful; but the time and place were vigorously indicated by her dress, which was of coarse stuff and simply designed. Plainly she was a child of the American wilderness, a daughter of old Vincennes on the Wabash in the time that tried men's souls.

"Jump, Jean!" she cried, her face laughing with a show of cheek dimples, an arching of finely etched brows and the twinkling of large blue gray eyes.

"Jump high and get them!"

While she waved her sun browned hand holding the cherries aloft, the breeze blowing fresh from the southwest tossed her hair so that some loose strands shone like ruffled flames.

clinging and struggling, until his hands clawed in the soft earth at the tree's root, while she held his captive leg almost vertically erect.

It was a show of great strength, but Alice looked quite unconscious of it, laughing merrily, the dimples deepening in her plump cheeks, her forearm, now bared to the elbow, gleaming white and shapely, while its muscles rippled on account of the jerking and kicking of Jean.

All the time she was holding the cherries high in her other hand, shaking them by the twig to which their slender stems attached to them and saying in a sweetly tantalizing tone:

"What makes you climb downward after cherries, Jean? What a foolish fellow you are, indeed, trying to grab cherries out of the ground, as you do potatoes! I'm sure I didn't suppose that you knew so little as that."

Jean, the hunchback, was a muscular little deformity and a wonder of good nature. How long he might have kept up the hopeless struggle with the girl's invincible grip would be hard to guess. His release was caused by the approach of a third person, who wore the robe of a Catholic priest and the countenance of a man who had lived and suffered a long time without much loss of physical strength and endurance.

This was Pere Beret, grizzled, short, compact, his face deeply lined, his mouth decidedly astant on account of some lost teeth, and his eyes set deep under gray, slungy brows. Looking at him when his features were in repose a first impression might not have been favorable; but seeing him smile or hearing him speak changed everything. His voice was sweetest itself, and his smile won you on the instant. Something like a pervading sorrow always seemed to be close behind his eyes and under his speech; yet he was a genial, sometimes almost jolly, man, very prone to join in the lighter amusements of his people.

"Children, children, my children," he called out as he approached along a little pathway leading up from the direction of the church, "what are you doing now? Bah there, Alice, will you pull Jean's leg off?"

At first they did not bear him, they were so nearly deafened by their own vocal discords.

"Why are you standing on your head with your feet so high in air, Jean?" he added. "It's not a polite attitude in the presence of a young lady. Are you a pig, that you poke your nose in the dirt?"

Alice now turned her bright head and gave Pere Beret a look of frank welcome, which at the same time shot a beam of willful self assertion.

"My daughter, are you trying to help Jean up the tree feet foremost?" the priest added, standing where he had baited just outside of the straggling yard fence.

He had his hands on his hips and was quietly chuckling at the scene before him, as one who, although old, sympathized with the natural and harmless sportiveness of young people and would as lief as not join in a prank or two.

"You see what I'm doing, Father Beret," said Alice. "I am preventing



"Jump high and get them!"

a great damage to you. You will maybe lose a good many cherry pies and dumplings if I let Jean go. He was climbing the tree to pilfer the fruit, so I pulled him down, you understand."

"Ta, ta!" exclaimed the good man, shaking his gray head; "we must reason with the child. Let go his leg daughter, I will vouch for him; eh, Jean?"

Alice released the hunchback, then laughed gaily and tossed the cluster of cherries into his hand, whereupon he began munching them voraciously and talking at the same time.

"I knew I could get them," he boasted, "and see, I have them now." He hopped around, looking like a species of ill formed monkey.

Pere Beret came and leaned on the low fence close to Alice. She was almost as tall as he.

"The sun scorches today," he said, he glancing to mop his furrowed face with a red flowered cotton handkerchief

"and from the look of the sky yonder," pointing southward. "It is going to bring on a storm. How is Mme. Roussillon today?"

"She is complaining as she usually does when she feels extremely well," said Alice. "That's why I had to take her place at the oven and bake pies. I got hot and came out to catch a bit of this breeze. Oh, but you needn't smile and look greedy, Pere Beret, the pies are not for your teeth!"

"My daughter, I am not a glutton, I hope. I had meat not two hours since—some broiled young squirrels with cress, sent me by Rene de Ronville. He never forgets his old father."

"Oh, I never forget you either, mon pere. I thought of you today every time I spread a crust and filled it with cherries, and when I took out a pie, all brown and hot, the red juice bubbling out of it so good smelling and tempting, do you know what I said to myself?"

"How could I know, my child?"

"Well, I thought this: 'Not a single bite of that pie does Father Beret get.'"

"Why so, my daughter?"

"Because you said it was bad of me to read novels, and told Mother Roussillon to hide them from me. I've had any amount of trouble about it."

"Ta, ta! Read the good books that I gave you. They will soon kill the taste for these silly romances."

"I tried," said Alice. "I tried very hard, and it's no use. Your books are dull and stupidly heavy. What do I care about something that a queer lot of saints did hundreds of years ago in times of plague and famine? Saints must have been poky people, and it is poky people who care to read about them, I think. I like reading about brave, heroic men and beautiful women, and war and love."

Pere Beret looked away with a curious expression in his face, his eyes half closed.

"And I'll tell you now, Father Beret," Alice went on after a pause, "no more claret and pies do you get until I can have my own sort of books back again to read as I please." She stamped her moccasin shod foot with decided energy.

The good priest broke into a hearty laugh, and, taking off his cap of grass straw, mechanically scratched his bald head.

Although, as Father Beret had said, the sun's heat was violent, causing that gentle soul to pass his bundled handkerchief with a wiping circular motion over his bald and bedewed pate, the wind was momentarily freshening, while up from behind the trees on the horizon beyond the river a cloud was rising blue black, tumbled and grim against the sky.

"Well," said the priest, evidently trying hard to exchange his laugh for a look of regretful resignation, "you will have your own way, my child, and—"

"Then you will have pies galore and no end of claret!" she interrupted, at the same time stepping to the wicket and peg latched gate of the yard and opening it. "Come in, you dear, good father, before the rain shall begin, and sit with me on the gallery" (the creole word for veranda) "till the storm is over."

There was not a photographer's camera to be had in those days, but what if a tourist with one in hand could have been there to take a snapshot at the priest and the maiden as they walked arm in arm to that squat little veranda! The picture today would be worth its weight in a first water diamond. It would include the cabin, the cherry tree, a glimpse of the raw, wild background and a sharp portrait group of Pere Beret, Alice and Jean the hunchback. Each of us can see them, even with closed eyes. Led by that wonderful guide, imagination, we step back a century and more to look over a scene at once strangely attractive and unspendably forlorn.

What was it that drew people away from the old countries, from the cities, the villages and the vineyards of beautiful France, for example, to dwell in the wilderness, amid wild beasts and wilder savage Indians, with a rude cabin for a home and the exposures and hardships of pioneer life for their daily experience?

Men like Gaspard Roussillon are of a distinct stamp. Take him as he was, born in France, on the banks of the Rhone near Avignon, he came as a youth to Canada, whence he drifted on the tide of adventure this way and that, until at last he found himself, with a wife, at Post Vincennes, that lonely picket of religion and trade which was to become the center of civilizing energy for the great northwestern territory. M. Roussillon had no children of his own; so his kind heart opened freely to two fatherless and motherless waifs. These were Alice, now called Roussillon, and the hunchback, Jean. The former was twelve years old when he adopted her, a child of Protestant parents, while Jean had been taken, when a mere babe, after his parents had been killed and scalped by Indians. Mme. Roussillon, a professional invalid, whose appetite never failed and whose motherly kindness expressed itself most often through strains of monotonous falsetto scolding, was a woman of little education and no refinement; while her husband clung tenaciously to his love of books, especially to the romances most in vogue when he took leave of France.

M. Roussillon had been, in a way, Alice's teacher, though not greatly inclined to abet Father Beret in his kindly efforts to make a Catholic of the girl, and most treacherously disposed toward the good priest in the matter of his well meant attempts to prevent her from reading and breathing the afore said romances. But for many weeks past Gaspard Roussillon had been absent from home, looking after his trading schemes with the Indians, and Pere Beret, acting on the suggestion of the proverb about the absent cat and the playing mouse, had formed an alliance offensive and defensive with Mme. Roussillon, in which it was strictly

stipulated that all novels and romances were to be forcibly taken and securely hidden away from Mme. Alice; which, to the best of Mme. Roussillon's ability, had accordingly been done.

Now, while the wind strengthened and the softly booming summer shower came on apace, the heavy cloud lifting as it advanced and showing under it the dark gray sheet of the rain, Pere Beret and Alice sat under the clapboard roof behind the vines of the veranda and discussed what was generally uppermost in the priest's mind upon such occasions, the good of Alice's immortal soul—a subject not absorbingly interesting to her at any time.

"Ah, my child," he was saying, "you are a sweet, good girl, after all, much better than you make yourself out to be. Your duty will control you. You will do it nobly at last, my child."

True enough, Father Beret, true enough!" she responded, laughing. "Your perception is most excellent, which I will prove to you immediately."

She rose while speaking and went into the house.

"I will return in a minute or two," she called back from a region which Pere Beret well knew was that of the pantry. "Don't get impatient and go away!"

Pere Beret laughed softly at the preposterous suggestion that he would even dream of going out in the rain, which was now roaring heavily on the loose board roof, and miss a cut of cherry pie—a cherry pie of Alice's making! And the Roussillon claret, too, was always excellent. "Ah, child," he thought, "your old father is not going away."

She presently returned, bearing on a wooden tray a ruby stained pie and a short, stout bottle flanked by two glasses.

"Of course I'm better than I sometimes appear to be," she said almost humbly, but with mischief still in her voice and eyes, "and I shall get to be very good when I have grown old. The sweetness of my present nature is in this pie."

She set the tray on a three legged stool which she pushed close to him.

"There, now," she said, "let the rain come. You'll be happy, rain or shine, while the pie and wine last, I'll be bound."

Pere Beret fell to eating right heartily, meantime handing Jean a liberal piece of the luscious pie.

"It is good, my daughter, very good, indeed," the priest remarked with his mouth full. "Mme. Roussillon has not neglected your culinary education." Alice filled a glass for him. It was Bordeaux and very fragrant. The bouquet reminded him of his sunny boyhood in France, of his journey up to Paris and of his careless, joy brimming youth in the gay city. How far away, how misty, yet how thrillingly sweet it all was! He sat with half closed eyes awhile, sipping and dreaming.

The rain lasted nearly two hours, but the sun was out again when Pere Beret took leave of his young friend. They had been having another good natured quarrel over the novels, and Mme. Roussillon had come out on the veranda to join in.

"I've hidden every book of them," said Madame, a stout and swartly woman, whose pearl white teeth were her only mark of beauty. Her voice indicated great stubbornness.

"Good, good; you have done very very duty, Madame," said Pere Beret, with immense approval in his charming voice.

"But, father, you said awhile ago that I should have my own way about this," Alice spoke up with spirit, "and on the strength of that remark of yours I gave you the pie and wine. You've eaten my pie and swigged the wine, and now—"

Pere Beret put on his straw cap, adjusting it carefully over the shingle dome out of which had come so many thoughts of wisdom, kindness and human sympathy. This done, he gently laid a hand on Alice's bright crown of hair and said:

"Bless you, my child. I will pray to the Prince of Peace for you as long as I live, and I will never cease to beg the Holy Virgin to intercede for you and lead you to the holy church."

He turned and went away, but when he was no farther than the gate Alice called out:

"Oh, Father Beret, I forgot to show you something!"

She ran forth to him and added in a low tone:

"You know that Mme. Roussillon has hidden all the novels from me."

She was fumbling to get something out of the loose front of her dress.

"Well, just take a glance at this, will you?" and she showed him a little leather bound volume, much cracked along the hinges of the back.

Pere Beret frowned and went his way shaking his head, but before he reached his little hut near the church he was laughing in spite of himself.

"She's not so bad, not so bad," he thought aloud; "it's only her young, independent spirit taking the bit for a wild run. In her sweet soul she is as good as she is pure."

CHAPTER II.

A LETTER FROM AFAEL. ALTHOUGH Father Beret was for many years a missionary on the Wabash, most of the time at Vincennes, the fact that no mention of him can be found in the records is not stranger than many other things connected with the old town's history. He was, like nearly all the men of his calling in that day, a self effacing and modest hero, apparently quite unaware that he deserved attention. He and Father Gibault, whose name is so beautifully and noisily connected with the stirring achievements of Colonel George Rogers Clark, were close friends and often companions. Probably Father Gibault himself, whose fame will never fade, would have been today as obscure as Father Beret but for the opportunity

given him by Clark to fix his name in the list of heroic patriots who assisted in winning the great northwest from the English.

Vincennes, even in the earliest days of its history, somehow kept up communication and, considering the circumstances, close relations with New Orleans. It was much nearer Detroit, but the Louisiana colony stood next to France in the imagination and longing of priests, voyageurs, coureurs de bois and reckless adventurers who had Latin blood in their veins. Father Beret first came to Vincennes from New Orleans, the voyage up the Mississippi, Ohio and Wabash in a pirogue lasting through a whole summer and far into the autumn. Since his arrival the post had experienced many vicissitudes, and at the time in which our story opens the British government claimed right of dominion over the great territory drained by the Wabash, and, indeed, over a large, indefinitely outlined part of the North American continent lying above Mexico, a claim just then being vigorously questioned, flintlock in hand, by the Anglo-American colonies.

Of course the handful of French people at Vincennes, so far away from every center of information and



"Here is a letter for you, father."

wholly occupied with their trading-trapping and missionary work, were late finding out that war existed between England and her colonies. Nor did it really matter much with them, one way or another. They felt secure in their lonely situation, and so went on selling their trinkets, weapons, domestic implements, blankets and intoxicating liquors to the Indians, whom they held bound to them with a power never possessed by any other white dwellers in the wilderness. Father Beret was probably subordinate to Father Gibault. At all events the latter appears to have had nominal charge of Vincennes, and it can scarcely be doubted that he left Father Beret on the Wabash while he went to live and labor for a time at Kaskaskia, beyond the plains of Illinois.

It is a curious fact that religion and the power of rum and brandy worked together successfully for a long time in giving the French posts almost absolute influence over the wild and savage men by whom they were always surrounded. The good priests deprecated the traffic in liquors and tried hard to control it, but soldiers of fortune and reckless traders were in the majority, their interests taking precedence of all spiritual demands and carrying everything along. What could the brave missionaries do but make the very best of a perilous situation?

But if the effect of rum as a beverage had strong allurements for the white man, it made an absolute slave of the Indian, who never hesitated for a moment to undertake any task, no matter how hard, bear any privation, even the most terrible, or brave any danger, although it might demand reckless desperation, if in the end a well filled bottle or jug appeared as his reward.

Of course the traders did not overlook such a source of power. Alcoholic liquor became their implement of almost magical work in controlling the lives, labors and resources of the Indians. The priests, with their captivating story of the cross, had a large influence in softening savage natures and averting many an awful danger, but, when everything else failed, rum always came to the rescue of a threatened French post.

We need not wonder, then, when we are told that Father Beret made no sign of distress or disapproval upon being informed of the arrival of a boat loaded with rum, brandy or gin. It was Rene de Ronville who brought the news, the same Rene already mentioned as having given the priest a plate of squirrels. He was sitting on the doorstep of Father Beret's hut when the old man reached it after his visit at the Roussillon home and held in his hand a letter which he appeared proud to deliver.

"A bateau and seven men with a cargo of liquor came during the rain," he said, rising and taking off his curious cap, which, made of an animal's skin, had a tall jaunty dangling from its crown tip, "and here is a letter for you, father. The bateau is from New Orleans. Eight men started with it, but one went ashore to hunt and was killed by an Indian."

Father Beret took the letter without apparent interest and said:

"Thank you, my son, sit down again, the door log is not wetter than the stools inside; I will sit by you."

The wind had driven a flood of rain into the cabin through the open door, and water twinkled in puddles here and there on the floor's puncheons. They sat down side by side, Father Beret snuffing the letter in an absent minded way.

"There'll be a jolly time of it tonight," Rene de Ronville remarked; "a roaring time."

"Why do you say that, my son?" the priest demanded.

"The wine and the liquor," was the reply. "Much drinking will be done. The men have all been dry here for some time, you know, and are as thirsty as sand. They are making ready to enjoy themselves down at the river house."

"Ah, the poor souls!" sighed Father Beret, speaking as one whose thoughts were wandering far away.

"Why don't you read your letter, Father?" Rene added.

The priest started, turned the soiled square of paper over in his hand, then thrust it inside his robe.

"It can wait," he said. Then, changing his voice: "The squirrels you gave me were excellent, my son. It was good of you to think of me," he added, laying his hand on Rene's arm.

"Oh, I'm glad I have pleased you, Father Beret, for you are so kind to me always, and to everybody. When I killed the squirrels I said to myself: 'These are young, juicy and tender; Father Beret must have these,' so I brought them along."

The young man rose to go, for he was somehow impressed that Father Beret must wish opportunity to read his letter and would prefer to be left alone with it. But the priest pulled him down again.

"Stay awhile," he said, "I have not had a talk with you for some time."

Rene looked a trifle uneasy.

"You will not drink any tonight, my son," Father Beret added. "You must not. Do you hear?"

The young man's eyes and mouth at once began to have a sullen expression. Evidently he was not pleased and felt rebellious, but it was hard for him to resist Father Beret, whom he loved, as did every soul in the post. The priest's voice was sweet and gentle, yet positive to a degree. Rene did not say a word.

"Promise me that you will not taste liquor this night," Father Beret went on, grasping the young man's arm firmly. "Promise me, my son; promise me."

Still Rene was silent. The men did not look at each other, but gazed away across the country beyond the Wabash to where a glory from the western sun flamed on the upper rim of a great cloud fragment creeping along the horizon.

"Eh bien, I must go," said Rene presently, getting to his feet nimbly and evading Father Beret's hand, which would have held him.

"Not to the river house, my son?" said the priest appealingly.

"No, not there. I have another letter; one for M'sieu' Roussillon. It came by the boat too. I go to give it to Mme. Roussillon."

Rene de Ronville was a dark, weather stained young fellow, neither tall nor short, wearing buckskin moccasins, trousers and tunic. His eyes were dark brown, keen, quick moving, set well under heavy brows. A razor had probably never touched his face, and his thin, curly beard crinkled over his strongly turned cheeks and chin, while his mustaches sprang out quite fiercely above his full lips, almost sensual mouth. He looked wiry and active, a man not to be lightly reckoned with in a trial of bodily strength and will power.

Father Beret's face and voice changed on the instant. He laughed dryly and said, with a sly gleam in his eyes:

"You could send the evening pleasantly with Mme. Roussillon and Jean, you know, is a very amusing fellow."

Rene brought forth the letter of which he had spoken and held it up before Father Beret's face.

"Maybe you think I haven't any letter for M'sieu' Roussillon," he blurted, "and maybe you are quite certain that I am not going to the house to take the letter."

"M. Roussillon is absent, you know," Father Beret suggested. "But cherry pies are just as good while he's gone as when he's at home, and I happen to know that there are some particularly delicious ones in the pantry of Mme. Roussillon. Mlle. Allee gave me a juicy sample, but then I dare say you do not care to have your pie served by her hand. It would interfere with your appetite. Eh, my son?"

Rene turned short about, wagging his head and laughing, and so with his back to the priest he strode away along the wet path leading to the Roussillon place.

Father Beret gazed after him, his face relaxing to a serious expression in which a trace of sadness and gloom spread like an elusive twilight. He took out his letter, but did not glance at it, simply holding it tightly gripped in his sinewy right hand. Then his old eyes stared vacantly, as eyes do when their sight is cast back many, many years into the past. The misadventure was from beyond the sea—he knew the handwriting—a waft of the flowers of Avignon seemed to rise out of it, as if by the pressure of his grasp.

A stoop shouldered, burly man went by, leading a pair of goats, a kid following. He was making haste excitedly, keeping the goats at a lively trot.

"Bon jour, Pere Beret," he flung out breezily, and walked rapidly on.

"Ah, ah; his mind is busy with the newly arrived cargo," thought the old priest, returning the salutation. "His throat aches for liquor—the poor man."

Then he read again the letter's supercriptions and made a faltering move as if to break the seal. His hands trembled violently, his face looked gray and drawn.

"Come on, you brutes," cried the receding man, jerking the throats of stags by which he led the goats.

Father Beret rose and turned into his damp little hut, where the light was dim on the crucifix hanging opposite the door against the clay